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Pattern of conferences

Utilization of the United Nations conference centres in Bangkok and Addis Ababa

Report of the Secretary-General**

I. Introduction

1. In its resolution 55/222 of 23 December 2000, the General Assembly welcomed steps taken by the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) and the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) to increase the utilization of the conference centres in Bangkok and Addis Ababa, respectively; noted with concern the lack of sufficient operational guidance in the management of the conference centres; noted with deep concern the inadequate staff structure and the insufficient financial resources allocated for the marketing of the centre in Addis Ababa; and requested the Secretary-General to continue to explore all possible options to increase further the utilization of the conference centres and to report thereon to it at its fifty-sixth session, through the Committee on Conferences.

2. Pursuant to that request and in line with the previous report of the Secretary-General (A/55/410), the present report takes stock of the utilization of the two centres, action taken, future plans and constraints remaining.

II. Operation of the United Nations conference centre in Bangkok

A. Utilization

3. In accordance with the request contained in resolution 55/222, a review has been conducted of the utilization of the conference centre at Bangkok for the year 2000 and up to May 2001.

4. Thanks to the measures outlined in the last report and the efforts of the servicing staff, the utilization of the centre has increased steadily. In 2000, a total of 499 events were organized (334 ESCAP, 68 non-ESCAP and 97 catering functions). That figure compares favourably with those for previous years, namely, 423 events in 1999, 374 in 1998 and 353 in 1997. For the first five months in 2001, the centre was the venue for 219 events (165 ESCAP, 23 non-ESCAP and 31 catering functions).

5. Since the current tendency in the organization of events involves other parallel activities, such as exhibitions, working group meetings, press briefings and conferences, it may be worthwhile recording the actual number of times the meeting rooms were used. The centre has a total of 14 meeting rooms (for details, see A/55/410, para. 7), while the centre at Addis Ababa has 9 meeting rooms (para. 24). It should be noted that

* A/56/150.

** The present report includes the most up-to-date information.

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the number of meeting rooms available and the size of the operation of the particular duty station are factors to be taken into consideration when the utilization rate is calculated for each centre. The 14 meeting rooms in Bangkok were utilized a total of 776 times in 1999 (65 times per month), 953 times in 2000 (79 times per month) and 512 times (102 times per month) for the period January-May 2001.

6. Of equal importance is the significance of the events and the status of the organizers using the facilities and services of the centre. Examples of non-ESCAP events held in the centre during the year 2000 are given below:

(a) Asia-Pacific Conference on Education for All 2000 Assessment, January 2000, attended by 400 delegates and organized by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization;

(b) Annual Assembly of the National Science and Technology Development Agency, April 2000, attended by 700 delegates and organized by the Agency (a Thai government agency);

(c) Seminar on Good Governance for Financial Institutions, June 2000, attended by 400 delegates and organized by the Bank of Thailand;

(d) Joint Australian-Thai Training Seminar "Pirap-Jabiru 2000", June 2000, attended by 120 government officials from the two countries and organized by the Australian Embassy in Bangkok;

(e) Annual Economic Review Forum, August 2000, attended by 400 delegates and organized by Reed Tradex Co., Ltd. (a professional conference organizer);

(f) National Congress of Law, September 2000, attended by 700 delegates and organized by the Public Lawyers Development Institute, Office of the Council of State (a Thai government institute);

(g) International Congress: In Pursuit of a Drug Free ASEAN 2015, October 2000, attended by 250 delegates and organized by the United Nations International Drug Control Programme of the Secretariat.

B. Constraints

7. Practically all the points of constraint mentioned in the previous report (A/55/410, paras. 11-15) still exist. In particular, the fixed configuration in the set-up of meeting rooms in the typical style of the United Nations does not meet the requirements of non-ESCAP events. For that reason, some requests from non-ESCAP event organizers had to be turned down. If commercial use of the centre is to be maximized, it will need to be possible to convert one of the large conference rooms from its fixed seating layout into a multi-purpose room with a flexible seating arrangement. The estimated cost of such a modification would be $273,000.

8. A P-2 post has been redeployed to the Conference Services Unit with the specific function of assisting in the marketing, management and utilization of the centre.

C. Action taken and future plans

9. In addition to action taken as reported previously (A/55/410, paras. 16-19), an Internet café has been established on the first floor of the centre with eight units with Internet access for the general use of meeting participants.

10. Action is now being taken to establish a lounge bar and a bookshop/souvenir shop on the ground floor of the centre within existing resources.

11. Efforts are continually being made to encourage Member States, specialized agencies and related entities of the United Nations, regional and other organizations and groups in the private sector to hold seminars, conferences or events at the centre.

12. In order to increase the commercial use of the centre, the conversion of one of the large conference rooms from its fixed configuration into a multi-purpose room with a flexible seating arrangement could be undertaken if Member States so wished and if the related resources were to be made available.

13. Taking advantage of the expertise and experience of professional conference organizers in the meeting convention industry, attempts are continuing to cooperate with them in bringing business to the centre, provided that the events are consistent with the principles and aims of the United Nations.

III. Operation of the United Nations conference centre in Addis Ababa

A. Utilization

14. As described below, several measures have been taken to increase the utilization of the facilities in Addis Ababa. As a result, in 2000, the centre attracted a total of 491 events. Those events can be divided into the following categories: 306 ECA, 100 United Nations entities and 85 non-United Nations agencies, a total of 491. There was a significant increase in the total number of events, up from 343 in 1998 and 356 in 1999.

15. It is encouraging to note that in 2000 the utilization rate stood at 41.26 per cent, compared with 28.82 per cent in 1998 and 29.92 per cent in 1999, a large increase during the last year, which may be attributed to the marketing and advertising strategies already being followed on a smaller scale during the past years.

16. As mentioned in the previous report (A/55/410, para. 32), programme managers continue to be encouraged to make greater use of the centre rather than organizing meetings away from Addis Ababa. Consequently, an increase of events by the divisions of ECA has been rising steadily, which indicates an improvement in ECA-organized meetings being held in the centre as opposed to previous years.

17. The concerted efforts of the staff of the centre, organizing tours of facilities for local event organizers and marketing and advertising both locally and internationally, and the experience of organizers who use the centre often have meant that many events of both other United Nations entities and non-United Nations bodies have been attracted to the centre. The consistent upward trend is outlined below:

Number of events organized at the United Nations conference centre in Addis Ababa, 1998-2000

	1998	*1999*	*2000*
Economic Commission for Africa	195	228	306
United Nations entities	122	68	100
Others	26	60	85
Total	**343**	**356**	**491**

18. From January to July 2001, the centre hosted a total of 158 events, as follows: 88 ECA, 52 United Nations entities, 19 non-United Nations bodies and others.

B. Constraints

19. The situation in Addis Ababa is similar to that in Bangkok: notwithstanding the improvement mentioned and the action taken, all the constraints described previously (A/55/410, paras. 26-29) still remain.

C. Action taken and future plans

20. Although the operational situation at the centre is unchanged, a few measures are being taken to alleviate the situation. These include the redeployment, on a loan basis, of a staff member from the United Nations conference centre in Nairobi to Addis Ababa to assist in managing the activities there.

21. At the same time, a P-3 level Chief of the Conference Coordination Unit is being recruited and additional staff members will be redeployed to facilitate the running of activities at the centre.

22. Owing to the success of the African Development Forum meeting in December 2000, which had a parallel event in the exhibition area, a number of conference organizers have expressed interest in holding parallel exhibitions at the centre. The British Council held a successful exhibition on the theme "Ethiopian Knowledge Age" in June 2001 at the centre, with approximately 23 exhibitors.

23. Efforts will continue to be made to encourage ECA, United Nations entities, regional organizations, embassies and non-United Nations bodies to make use of the centre for events, receptions and exhibitions.

24. A favourable catering service contract was negotiated with the Sheraton Addis and the service is already in place to provide quality catering during all events held at the centre.

IV. Conclusion

25. The encouraging trends in the utilization of the two conference centres continued in 2000 and in the first half of 2001. With sustained efforts by the

respective secretariats and the implementation of future plans, utilization of the centres is expected to continue to increase.

26. With the improvement of the economies of the two regions and given the quality of the facilities and services provided, many non-ESCAP and non-ECA event organizers are becoming repeat customers of the centres. Since the facilities in Bangkok and Addis Ababa are still relatively new and bearing in mind that promotional and marketing activities started only recently need time to yield noticeable results, it is reasonable to expect that the centres will further diversify their services and attract more non-United Nations events.